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Intersections of Ecology and Empire: A Postcolonial Reading of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract:

In Indian literature, the study of environmental issues and themes in the setting of postcolonial countries is known as postcolonial ecology. The article examines how contemporary Indian literature especially that of the postcolonial period, addresses ecological concerns by exploring the connections among environmental degradation, socio-political processes, and colonial legacies. This article attempts to shed light on how Indian writers portray the nuanced relationship between people and the environment in the wake of colonialism by analyzing Kiran Desai's 2006 novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Although the novel has received much praise from critics for its examination of postcolonial themes, little is known about its ecological aspects. This article analyses the book using an ecological postcolonial perspective, illuminating how complexly it presents environmental issues within postcolonial India. The article analyses how the book handles the interconnections of environmental degradation, globalization, and colonial legacies by drawing on ecocritical theory and postcolonial discourse. The article delves into important themes, including landscape, resistance, colonial

exploitation, and cultural ecology, through rigorous textual study and theoretical interaction, clarifying how Desai's story highlights the ecological effects of globalization and colonialism in the Indian Himalayas. This article highlights the critical necessity of incorporating ecological ideas into postcolonial studies by bringing the novel's ecological aspects to the forefront and adding to the larger conversation on environmental literature and postcolonial studies. This article attempts to contend that *The Inheritance of Loss* presents a powerful analysis of environmental injustice and a captivating depiction of the connections that remain between post-colonial human society and the natural world.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Ecology, Globalization, Nature, Identity.

The lingering effects of colonialism on the environment are explored by writers in several postcolonial Indian literary works. Authors like Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* (2004) demonstrate how colonial exploitation of natural resources, such as rivers, forests, and land, has resulted in ecological imbalance and environmental deterioration. These stories highlight the negative ecological effects of colonial practices like dam construction, monoculture farming, and deforestation, which still have an impact on regional ecosystems and indigenous populations. The intrinsic relationship between culture, ecology, and indigenous knowledge systems is frequently celebrated in Indian literature. Writers who also examine how cultural practices and traditional ecological knowledge impact human interactions with the environment are Vandana Singh (*Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*, 2018) and Manjushree Thapa (*Forget Kathmandu*, 2005). In *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley propose that,

"In many postcolonial ecologies, indigenous ways of knowing and being offer an alternative epistemology and ontology that seeks to reimagine human-nature relations

not through the lens of domination but through reciprocity, responsibility, and respect."

(DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 72)

They challenged the conventional view of Western-oriented modernity, which frequently ignores traditional ecological wisdom, by highlighting the significance of conserving indigenous wisdom and promoting sustainable environmental relationships. Along with exploring themes of resistance and ecological justice, it follows characters as they fight for sustainable practices and deal with the fallout from environmental degradation. Authors such as Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Mahasweta Devi in *Mother of 1084* (1974) portray characters that oppose environmental exploitation, stand up to exploitative methods, and work to preserve their natural surroundings. These stories show how oppressed groups may take action against environmental injustices and stand up for their rights to clean water, land, and air.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* primarily explores issues of identity, migration, globalization, and the aftereffects of colonialism. However, it has further aspects that can be examined via the prism of postcolonial ecology. Postcolonial ecology looks at how people interact with the environment and the effects of colonialism, with a particular emphasis on problems like resistance, cultural displacement, and environmental degradation. In the book, Sai's grandfather Jemubhai Patel, the former judge's residence served as a symbol of how Western values were imposed on an indigenous landscape and how colonial exploitation occurred. Carefully manicured English gardens stood in stark contrast to the surrounding wilderness, signifying the distance between colonial authorities and the nature they attempted to manage.

"The judge was forced to breathe the air of a disintegrating empire, to look at the mountainous green foothills and witness the sharp drop to a flat brown plain that was

India. India, the cluttered land of his childhood, the world's open sewer, its garbage dump, the dung heap of the universe." (Desai 2006, 05)

The judge's disenchantment with India is summed up in this comment at the start of the novel, which is representative of a typical emotion among characters returning after living abroad. It draws attention to the striking contrast between postcolonial India's grim reality of impoverishment and contamination of the environment and the scenic grandeur of the Himalayan slopes. The Judge becomes an emblem of colonial exaltation because of his English schooling and adherence to Western traditions. His opposition to new technologies and loyalty to customs are clear signs of his unwillingness to change with the times, a world increasingly characterized by globalization and modernity. His internal conflict with the quickly changing socioeconomic and cultural environment in postcolonial India is reflected in this opposition. Throughout the novel, he struggles with an identity crisis as he reconciles his colonial past and Indian present, feeling detached and alienated from his own culture despite his Indian ancestry. Taking his character into the focus, Manmeet Kour in her article *The Crisis Of Identity In Kiran Desai's The Inheritance Of Loss* describes the novel as follows:

"The macrocosm of this novel is a mimic space in which the "self" deprived of autonomy and true representation awaits for a meaningful individual as well as a collective identity to make sense of his/her fragmented subjugated self." (Kour 2016, 875)

In *Nation and Narration* (1990), Homi K. Bhabha has examined the intricate processes of postcolonialism via literary and cultural discourse. Bhabha focuses on the difficulties of portraying postcolonial experiences and the function of narrative in forming national identities, even if her work covers a wide range of postcolonial theoretical topics.

“Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye. Such an image of the nation - or narration - might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from these traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the West.” (K. Bhabha 1990, 01)

Bhabha presents the idea of the "third space" as a location for hybridity and cultural negotiation. He contends that the third space, between colonizer and colonized, disturbs dichotomous oppositions and creates opportunities for fresh approaches to identity development and cultural expression. His idea of the third space challenges established categories and hierarchies by highlighting the significance of appreciating and embracing the in-betweenness of postcolonial subjectivities. Bhabha highlights the conflicts and inconsistencies present in nationalist rhetoric as she critically investigates how national identity is constructed in postcolonial circumstances. He contends that restrictive narratives that obscure or dismiss alternative perspectives and experiences are frequently the foundation of postcolonial nationalism. Bhabha's critique of nationalism emphasizes the necessity of challenging and undermining prevailing national narratives to provide room for inclusive and pluralistic forms of postcolonial identity.

“The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.” (K. Bhabha 1994, 161)

Now, looking at Bhabha’s idea of a third space, we see Judge Patel’s character as the epitome of the privilege that came with the British colonization of India, who is stuck between his identities of colonizer and colonized. Being a former judge gives him social standing and

financial stability, but it also keeps him apart from the neighbourhood and heightens his sense of alienation. His palace represents the persistence of colonial power relations and the imposition of Western values on the indigenous landscape with its English gardens and opulent furniture. Judge Patel has a metamorphosis as he wrestles with the reality of postcolonial India and his background throughout the book. He starts to doubt his commitment to British ideals and goes through periods of introspection and self-examination. However, he experiences ambiguity and internal disputes on his path to self-awareness, and by the book's end, he is still a complicated and mysterious character. N. Keerthana pinpoints in her essay that, in "Attempting to get into the imperial centre, the skin colour becomes the eyesore and the biggest obstacle for the judge. He then figures out the disguise, by using the powder puff. But back in India, the powder is rarely used, and if being used, it is only for the women. The family members cannot understand the judge's behaviour and some even mock him. He is cut off from the colonial centre, on the other, he is cut off from his culture and his family. And the double isolation traps him in the 'identity crisis.'" (Keerthana 2018, 38)

The significance of narrative in both portraying and challenging colonial and postcolonial experiences is at the heart of Bhabha's investigation of postcolonialism in *Nation and Narration*. He looks at how texts from literature and culture navigate the intricacies of postcolonial subjectivities, providing alternatives to prevailing discourses and ways of representation. The significance of storytelling and cultural creation in expressing postcolonial identities and histories is emphasized by Bhabha's analysis of narrative.

"So, you see, the forests are collapsing; the tree roots have nothing to hold them together and the soil is washed away by the rain. This year is even worse than the last, I think.

We haven't had any vegetables, and this time even the rice is suffering." (Desai 2006, 130)

Desai here draws attention to the ecological deterioration occurring in the area, including soil erosion and deforestation. The local environment is impacted by the fall of trees and the annihilation of vegetation, but the livelihoods of those who depend on agriculture are also directly impacted. It emphasizes how closely human activity and environmental sustainability are related.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his work *Provincializing Europe* (2000), also recognizes the effects of colonialism on the environment, especially when it comes to resource extraction and altered land usage. He looks at how, for the sake of imperial expansion and financial gain, colonial powers destroyed ecosystems, changed landscapes, and took advantage of natural resources. Chakrabarty emphasizes the connection between human cultures and the natural world in the context of colonial encounters by addressing the environmental aspects of colonialism. Environmental history narratives that emphasize Western experiences and viewpoints are criticized by Chakrabarty as being Eurocentric. He contends that conventional environmental histories frequently ignore the many ecological knowledge systems and non-Western nations' environmental behaviours. Chakrabarty advocates for a pluralistic and inclusive approach to environmental history that emphasizes non-Western civilizations' contributions and their agency in forming environmental landscapes.

"And then slowly, very slowly, the forest began to recede. In its place, the hills surrounding the house looked like a garden of orange rhododendrons in bloom, everything covered in fire. From a distance, it looked like a beautiful flower, from up close you could see the awful truth: the hillsides were burnt bald, the earth was black, and the smell of burning leaves filled the air." (Desai 2006, 258)

This evocative statement captures the destructive power of wildfires, which are probably made worse by human activity like reckless burning or clearing land. The image of the land turning black and the slopes burned bald serves to highlight the extent of the devastation wildfires inflict on the environment. This quotation highlights how delicate ecosystems are and how important it is to take good care of the environment.

"The water in the rivers grew blacker and blacker until it was thick like paint, and people stopped drinking from the streams and lived on Coca-Cola." (Desai 2006, 280)

The phrase demonstrates how water bodies can become contaminated, most often by industrial effluents or other sources of contamination. The extreme contamination that renders river water unfit for human consumption and forces people to turn to bottled drinks like Coca-Cola for hydration is demonstrated by the comparison of river water to paint. The passage highlights the significance of water conservation and pollution control measures by reflecting on the effects of unbridled industrialization and the depletion of freshwater resources.

"When they arrived, the tiger was eating the child's throat. Her stomach hung like an empty purse, hungering for other, better things." (Desai 2006, 281)

The ecological disharmony brought on by human incursion into wildlife habitats is symbolized by this remark. The child's attack by the tiger highlights how habitat destruction and disintegration result in a loss of natural prey and increased conflict between wildlife and humans. The tiger's ravenousness for "other, better things" highlights the consequences of habitat loss and biodiversity reduction by reflecting the upheaval of natural food chains and ecosystems.

"He looked up into the face of his father, but his father was hidden behind his name, and his name was hidden in the letterhead of his letter, and his letter lay like a snake in the lawless jungle of its many meanings." (Desai 2006, 36)

Sai considers the intricacies of power and identity in postcolonial India in this quotation. The idea that the father's name is "hidden behind his name" alludes to a loss of individuality and autonomy that is eclipsed by the power and heritage of colonial institutions, which the father's work as a judge represents. The phrase "lawless jungle of its many meanings" highlights how relationships and hierarchies are still shaped by colonialism, adding to the ambiguity and unreliability of postcolonial legal, social and personal institutions.

In the framework of globalization, hybridity, a term that describes the blending and mingling of cultures and identities, is emphasized by Arjun Appadurai, a known Indian-American theorist in Globalization studies. He contends that new hybrid forms emerge as a result of cultural exchanges and interactions, upending preconceived ideas about authenticity and identity in his 1996 collection of essays *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, where he says that, "*Ethnic and national identities are the unstable products of constant and deep-seated struggles to control and regulate cultural meanings in a world of enormous flux and disjuncture.*" (Appadurai 1996, 33). Appadurai presents the idea of "ethnoscapes" to study the dynamics of international migration and movement. He draws attention to the ways that cross-border migration alters social environments and gives rise to fresh kinds of conflict and cultural interchange. Appadurai highlights how critical it is to comprehend the politics of mobility within a postcolonial framework, where questions of citizenship, migration, and displacement are intertwined with more general concerns about power and injustice. Appadurai challenges the widely held belief that globalization is a force for cultural homogenization and makes the case for a view of the global cultural economy that is characterized by neocolonial processes and unequal power relations. He argues that non-Western cultures are marginalized and turned into commodities as a result of the continued existence of Western cultural hegemony in the global marketplace. He advocates for practices

that strengthen the voices of the oppressed and support cultural autonomy, calling for a revaluation of cultural diversity and equity within the global cultural economy.

"He would read about a land that wasn't his, and had been taken from him. But not taken once: he would read about his land taken from him in the past, and then taken again every day, every day." (Desai 2006, 283)

The continuous fight for respect and a sense of identity in the wake of colonialism is encapsulated in Biju's lament on the dissolution of his homeland and identity. The phrase "taken again every day" is used often to highlight how underprivileged people in postcolonial societies are constantly exploited and denied rights. The story of Biju reveals the never-ending cycle of colonial tyranny and its ongoing effects on the livelihoods of people who have lost their homeland and culture. We can simply say, "The irony is that the cook is nationless inside nation and his son, Biju, is nationless outside the nation." As stated by Nasrullah Mambrol in her 2021 article "Disorientation, Dislocation and Displacement in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*". The legacy of colonialism and social disparity in India are also discussed in Biju's story. His choice to immigrate to the US was motivated by the widespread poverty and dearth of chances in his nation, which are made worse by the effects of neoliberal economic policies and the heritage of colonial exploitation. Biju's experiences shed light on the unequal distribution of wealth and resources in the global economy as well as the long-lasting repercussions of colonialism on postcolonial cultures. The novel presents a critique of global capitalism and its effects on underprivileged groups through Biju's story. The harsh reality of global economic systems, where wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of a select few while the rest struggle to survive, is reflected in Biju's exploitation and unstable existence in New York City. Other than Biju, the characters Noni and Lola also live in the United States and are Sai's aunt and uncle. Their personas shed light on issues of migration, diaspora, and cultural alienation.

According to how she is portrayed, Noni and her spouse, Lola, have made their home in the United States. She is shown as someone who is experiencing sentiments of cultural dislocation and longing for her native country while attempting to adjust to her new life in America.

"Sometimes Noni looked at him and wondered if his years in America had made him a little like their maid back home, who got up in the middle of the night to watch weddings on the only TV in the village, a black-and-white one that had to be ceremoniously plugged in." (Desai 2006, 173)

This passage captures Noni's observations of Lola's altered conduct as a result of their immigration to the US. She observes how Lola uses customs and rituals to try to connect with their ethnic roots, just like the maid back home. Lola is shown as a man who is having identity and belonging issues and is attempting to find his place in American culture.

"Lola, trapped in his car with his hands on the wheel, couldn't shake off the feeling that in the eyes of the people passing by he was an intruder, a criminal, and then there would come the days when Lola would make it back into his house and feel, instead, that the world outside was a cloud of poison." (Desai 2006, 176)

This passage embodies Lola's feelings of discomfort and isolation in America. He continually senses the hatred and judgment of everyone around him, making him feel like an alien. Even though he is physically in America, he lacks a sense of connection and yearns for an elusive sense of belonging. The characters of Noni and Lola in the novel are powerful illustrations of the difficulties associated with migration, diaspora, and cultural alienation. Kiran Desai here examines issues of identity, displacement, and the pursuit of belonging in a globalized world via personal stories.

"It was what they had always known to be true: You gave up your ability to communicate with the world, and the world became a more comfortable place. This was how they lived: by not communicating." (Desai 2006, 341)

Gyan's observation here illustrates how colonialism's legacy shapes social and communication habits in postcolonial nations. The colonized peoples lost their agency and voice as a result of the colonial government's suppression of their native languages and cultural manifestations. The erasure of native languages and identities in the face of colonial rule is highlighted by Gyan's submission to a life of quiet and seclusion, underscoring colonialism's lasting effects on self-expression and communication. Gyan feels displaced and unclear about his culture despite being of Nepali descent. Working as a cook in a colonial home allows him to manage the power, privilege, and colonial legacy dynamics of postcolonial India, which brings to light the intricacies of his identity. Gyan's job in the judge's home reflects his goals for career progression and social mobility. He aspires to overcome the constraints placed on him by his social background and uses education and hard effort to enhance his socioeconomic level.

Gyan's goal is representative of the hopes of many people in postcolonial cultures who, in the face of well-ingrained social structures, aspire to upward mobility. The plights of oppressed groups in postcolonial India are embodied in Gyan's persona, especially those of Nepali immigrants residing in the Indian Himalayas. The novel examines issues of displacement, cultural hybridity, and the search for dignity and belonging in a world characterized by social and economic inequality from his point of view. Gyan's persona represents the disenfranchised and disadvantaged people vying for agency and dignity in postcolonial civilizations. In the years following colonialism, his encounters and relationships with many personalities provide social commentary on the nuances of privilege, power, and identity.

"All over the world men and women are being pushed off their land into the cities to work as underpaid labourers in industry and services. And it's all done for the good of humanity!" (Desai 2006, 303)

Sai's awareness of the postcolonial economic exploitation that occurs in many developing nations, where rural residents are driven from their land and compelled to migrate to metropolitan areas in search of low-paying jobs, is evident in this comment. The claim that exploitation is justified "for the good of humanity" draws attention to the duplicity of these kinds of economic policies, which frequently put the interests of capitalists ahead of the welfare of underprivileged groups. Her plural heritage, her mother is English and her father is Indian, contributes to her feelings of cultural ambiguity and identity issues.

Sai's diverse ancestry is a reflection of postcolonial India's complex colonial past and cultural hybridity. Sai yearns for belonging and connection despite her affluent surroundings. She struggles to develop a sense of herself and belonging in the multilingual and cosmopolitan Kalimpong region, feeling cut off from both her Indian and English roots. Her bond with Gyan, her Nepali tutor, represents her need for cross-cultural and cross-social connectedness. Sai's romantic engagement with Gyan is symbolic of her desire for self-reliance and freedom. Sai defies convention and pursues a relationship with Gyan despite social expectations and resistance from their families because of their different social origins, demonstrating her quest for agency and self-determination in things of the heart. Sai struggles to understand the colonial legacy in her family's past as the granddaughter of retired colonial judge, Judge Patel. She encounters the prejudice and privilege that come with her grandfather's status as well as the ongoing repercussions of colonial oppression on the local indigenous populations.

The intricacies of colonial identity and its influence on postcolonial society are clarified by Sai's conversations with her grandfather and his erstwhile associates. Sai continues on a path

of growth and self-discovery throughout the book. She negotiates the intricacies of her relationships, faces prejudice and societal expectations, and struggles with issues of identity and belonging. Sai's experiences have shaped her perception of the world and herself, resulting in reflective and developmental moments. Sai's character is a metaphor for the difficulties people encounter when attempting to make sense of the intricacies of postcolonial identity. In postcolonial civilizations, identity is complex and multifaceted. Her persona reflects the contradictions between tradition and modernity, East and West, privilege and marginalization.

"In a few hundred years, the followers of the British Empire had worn down the soul of the town, leaving the new Indians to walk the streets and wonder what had happened to their ancestors' place." (Desai 2006, 12)

Kiran Desai here provides a rich canvas for post-colonially examining the linkages between environment and empire. Desai deftly interweaves issues of environmental degradation, cultural exploitation, and resistance through the story of characters negotiating the difficulties of identity, displacement, and power dynamics in the Indian Himalayas. The story highlights the negative environmental effects of globalization and imperial exploitation by eloquently illustrating how colonial legacies have affected the natural ecosystem. The characters' experiences are set against the backdrop of Desai's depiction of verdant forests, towering mountains, and tranquil valleys, which highlights the innate bond that exists between people and their surroundings. Furthermore, *The Inheritance of Loss* emphasizes how colonization shatters customary ecological knowledge and practices, which weakens indigenous identities and deteriorates the ecosystem. The judge's persona, representing the haughty and detached attitude of colonialism, perfectly captures the damaging consequences of Western values thrust onto the native environment. There are, nevertheless, glimmers of resistance and resiliency in Desai's book among the environmental difficulties and cultural upheavals. In the face of

ecological and cultural exploitation, characters like Sai and Biju work to establish their autonomy while navigating the complexity of their blended identities.

In conclusion, *The Inheritance of Loss* asks its readers to consider the complex interactions between people and the natural environment as well as the lasting effects of empire. Kiran Desai pushes us to address the ecological effects of imperialism and to support environmentally responsible practices that respect other cultural viewpoints and advance ecological justice through a postcolonial interpretation. Desai's moving story is a potent reminder of how important it is to understand how ecology and empire mix in the modern world.

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